

Company filming documentary on Mumia Abu-Jamal harassed by Philadelphia authorities

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On Point Productions, a documentary film company, encountered opposition from Philadelphia authorities in their dramatization of the case of political prisoner and death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal. The company is preparing a three-part series called "Undue Process," which takes up the case of Mumia and other prisoners.

Abu-Jamal, a former member of the Black Panther Party and a radio journalist, was railroaded to prison 18 years ago on charges that he murdered a Philadelphia policeman. His defense attorneys are demanding a new trial on the grounds that his constitutional rights were violated. The police and prosecutors coerced witnesses and manufactured false evidence to convict him during his 1982 trial.

Film director Michael Birenbaum explained his motivations for making the documentary to the *World Socialist Web Site*. "This case should not be overlooked," he said, "I have a strong sensibility toward civil rights and Mumia's case needs to be shown in a different light. After doing extensive research on the arrest and trial one could only conclude that this was a case of gross judicial misconduct."

Birenbaum said it was necessary to counter media portrayals of Abu-Jamal. He made particular mention of the ABC television program "20-20" reported by White House correspondent Sam Donaldson. Aired in 1998 and again in 1999, it presented Abu-Jamal as a cold-blooded cop killer and claimed that his supporters were ignorant of the facts of the case. The program put forward the police department version of the shooting on December 9, 1981 and all but ignored the glaring contradictions pointed to by Abu-Jamal's attorneys and supporters as the basis for a new trial.

The first problem the On Point Productions film crew

encountered during filming in November last year was being able to reenact the actual shooting at the 13th and Locust Street location, where police officer Daniel Faulkner was shot in 1981. Police and city officials were hostile because the staging of the scene contradicts the prosecution's version of events. It shows Abu-Jamal running across a parking lot when he sees Faulkner beating his brother, William Cook, with a flashlight. The officer had stopped Cook's car for driving the wrong way on a one-way street. The reenactment shows Faulkner shooting an approaching Abu-Jamal, and Faulkner in turn being shot by a passenger in the car, who then runs from the scene.

On two separate occasions the permit to film at this location was canceled, with Birenbaum receiving a phone call from the Philadelphia Mayor's Office the second time. The outgoing mayor Ed Rendell, who recently became head of the Democratic National Committee, was District Attorney at the time of the shooting and oversaw the prosecution of Abu-Jamal. Birenbaum was told by the mayor's legal department that it was impermissible to film there because of a pledge made to the policeman's widow, Maureen Faulkner.

While the film crew was eventually permitted to film at a location 10 blocks away, which bore a vague resemblance to 13th and Locust, they did so under the watchful eyes of off-duty police officers. The car rental company contracted to provide vehicles for the filming also expressed hostility.

Abu-Jamal's case is currently pending before the federal district court. His lawyers filed a habeas corpus petition on October 15 and are asking for an evidentiary hearing to enable the federal court to examine all the

evidence and hear witnesses proving their client's innocence. US District Judge William Yohn Jr. is expected to rule in the next few months on whether to grant an evidentiary hearing or rely on transcripts from the Pennsylvania state courts.

The case of Mumia Abu-Jamal has become a focal point in the US and internationally in the struggle against capital punishment, racism and police repression. A report released by the Justice Policy Institute, a research group critical of US prison policy, recently reported that the US ended 1999 with close to 2 million men and women in federal, state and local prisons and jails. Approximately 3,500 of these inmates are on death row.

Mumia's writings and commentary have drawn attention to the brutality of the US prison system and sparked discussion about the relationship between race and poverty and the criminal justice system. Since filing the habeas corpus appeal Mumia's attorneys have received 15,000 letters from all over the world to deliver to Judge Yohn.



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